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2/10/06

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Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20554
in/re MB Docket No. .05-311

Friends,

I have been involved in fostering citizen use of cable television since 1972 when, as co-founder of the Alternate Media Center at NYU we created an internship program to train and monitor coordinators who set up the first community access centers. We trained a total of 29 "interns", at least 20 of whom are still active in the field. It was this group which formed the National Federation of Cable Programmers (now renamed the Alliance for Community Media) which has ever since inspired a nation-wide network of such centers. Since 1992 I have served as boardmember of Manhattan Neighborhood Network, the largest of these access centers in terms of programs made and cablecast.

All the above experience has deepened my conviction that when given the opportunity ordinary citizens of the greatest variety in terms of age, educational level, ethnicity and community concerns can and will make responsible use of the opportunity provided by the existence of these facilities and access to channels.

When I first became involved I joined a small group of academics and community development practitioners who were fearful that the emerging electronic communications world would leave behind all but the most affluent and well connected. What was then a problem has become an overwhelming reality. Only on the so-called PEG channels of cable systems is there an opportunity for most people to exercise their freedom to communicate beyond one-on-one exchange.

From the beginning of our practical test beds in the 6 cabled franchise areas we learned the vital importance of continuity, something that could seldom be maintained without some kind of permanent, stable staff structure, a place where people could be trained and make their programs and the equipment to make programs that were of good enough technical quality to reach a wide audience via cable. Over the years our demonstrations persuaded more and more municipalities to write into their franchises requirements that these things be provided, covered by a portion of the charge municipalities were permitted by the FCC to add to the cable bills in partial payment for the use of publicly owned property (ie rights of way, power poles, etc.).

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Over time we have grown to appreciate the rightness of the Commission's decision to let each community determine for itself its own needs in regard to public access. In many jurisdictions, particularly the ones with fewer subscribers, all three kinds of access (Public, Educational and Government (PEG) operate best when efforts and facilities are joined. In larger places, New York City for example, each borough has its own Public Access entity while the city operates its own channels for the municipality as a whole.

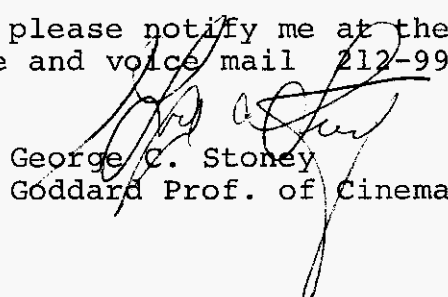
At first we advocates were thinking primarily in local terms. Over the years we have discovered that each person has, roughly, two communities: one the immediate one where we live, the other communities of interest which link us with like-minded people all over the country. Increasingly now Public Access is providing the means to connect both. In no other means of communication is there such freedom to navigate by the average citizen without having to negotiate with professionals (and the commercial interests that control them).

The fascinating thing is to look closely at our history over 35+ years and to see how much continuity there has been in the utilization of the channels. The average American makes at least three major moves in his/her lifetime. More often than not people are taking their experience of public access with them. They were introduced to making programs in grammar school. This experience helped them bond with people from other parts of town when they joined the cable clubs in high school. When they go away to college they bring the skill with them and often get involved in programs that help them feel a part of another strange world. After college they may settle in still another place, making community cable a means to find belonging in their church or municipal group. More and more frequently now I find old acquaintances in their new retirement communities using access as a purposeful activity where they can both contribute their skill and find acceptance and fulfillment.

Like the public libraries, access centers need professional guidance (which takes steady funding) and a keen sense of what the locality needs and has a right to expect. Unlike the libraries, access is supported only by those who can receive it. This is a drawback which might be contemplated by the FCC in future legislation. But for now our concern is that we hold onto what we have.

If you would like to talk more please notify me at the above address. By direct phone line and voice mail 212-998-1718. By E mail: gcs1@nyu.edu

Cordially,


George C. Stoney
Goddard Prof. of Cinema